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AbstractionsInMetal

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By

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THESIS

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My work has been rooted in the philosophy of Existentialism. Especially in the belief that individuality is crucial in finding happiness and that we are not preprogrammed prior to birth but are provided some basics but we are the sum of our own experiences and personal choices. Society can compartmentalize humans for its benefit in many ways but this is not beneficial to our personal humanity. What I make are reflections and commentary to how I see these effects and how I choose to try and rebel. Abstract metal weapons, black and pointed, made to covey a battle against conformity, control, and structure. Futuristic metaphors used to swing, jab, and shoot mediocrity. Chunky little facets like tadpoles to the frog. They were created to work with a favorite material and to experiment and develop my skills. Made from a lust to put my hand on steel again. And the boxy, domesticated animals made of steel looking like giant toys. They evoke a claim that the corporate man has become the pig in the trough or the faithful dog on the lease. Empty and humorous they define how human supply and demand along with control has reduced the working man to just another cog in the wheel. How standardization has made work so completely uninteresting you can barely cope. Like the Mario Savio quote below infers, I want my freedom, err, my individuality, so I create my work for my identity.

> “There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious—makes you so sick at heart—that you can't take part. You can't even passively take part. And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all.”

So with metal and bone, paint and patina, I communicate my ideas and become my own individual self. But this is not something new, creating and making has always been a part of who I am. I appreciate my imagination and creativity as they are key factors in helping me feel unique. For me, my work has always been something that differentiates me from the “herd”, and even from other creatives. I have always been passionate about using my imagination, but making art was merely a leisure activity. It wasn’t until later, when found the right material for me, that I felt it coming together into something that I would take very seriously.

Taking my art more seriously started with a struggle to find myself. I had been working in corporate environments for a number of years and I reached a point in my life where I felt some personal “leveling” was beginning. Leveling in the sense that I felt my uniqueness was becoming nonexistent because I felt that I lacked complexities and individuality. The absurdity and boredom started to set in and I needed find a way to counteract my conditioning. I needed to find personal affirmation. My job reminded me of the office scene from the film Joe versus the Volcano, which is filled with existential references. It was grey, unfulfilling and regular. My

work environment was toxic with fluorescent pollutants and noisy nothingness. Individuality was discouraged in favor of corporate absurdity and most of the other workers seemed dull or miserable. In the movie, though courage and awareness, Joe finds his individuality and becomes "conscious" to living life in the present and this was my goal. There is a fantastic quote by one of the movie's main characters "Patricia". She comments that existential leveling still exists in most everyone but few people have evaded this conditioning and have found truth in their individuality and meaning in their lives.

> "My father says that almost the whole world is asleep. Everybody you know. Everybody you see. Everybody you talk to. He says that only a few people are awake and they live in a state of constant total amazement."

So I devised a plan to continue my education and enrolled in some courses at Governors State University to complete a B.A. degree. I noticed the school had a sculpture program and that it had a foundry on site. I needed some general electives so I enrolled in a sculpture class. This was where I met John Payne and it was in his studio class that I first felt this very natural belonging. The course work was very challenging but it was not difficult and I was feeling success and enjoying college again. It was here that I was first exposed to the lost wax casting process and learned the proper techniques for working in a foundry environment. I was taught how to properly carve wax, how to add sprues for venting, how to make and attach a pour cup, how to mix and apply silicate slurry and other courser aggregates to create a strong outer shell, as well as how to do a "burn out", melt/pour metal, and clean up the investment (Fig 1). I used silicon

bronze and aluminum for my castings and metal was quickly becoming my new favorite material, and it would be for a very long time.

After taking many studio classes with John Payne and completing the other necessary courses I graduated with my B.A. Although my foundry work was primarily figurative it was around this time that I became very interested in abstract expressionism and the artists that made it. I started researching and appreciating artists like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Pablo Picasso, and John Chamberlain. Their obscure and ambiguous style really appealed to me and I liked that they worked without regard for conventional standards of beauty. Because they seemed to work without any guidelines their work was very unique and authentic, i.e. more human. Of all the abstract expressionists, metal artist John Chamberlain is my favorite (Fig. 2). His creative style and artistic philosophy has definitely had an influence on me and my work. Seeming to be very adventurous and zealous, he has always reminded me of the Ernest Hemingway of modern art. While studying his work I recognized that the strength of his pieces rely heavily on good composition. This showed me how important composition was to the complexity of a piece and how it made it that much more interesting. I also found it fascinating how diverse the public's opinions about his work were as some saw brilliance while others saw junk. Chamberlain's work also taught me is could be appropriate to paint metal to enhance a sculpture's look or to help convey a specific message.

I returned to G.S.U. to take another metals class and found that the familiar studio was now in a transition. The metals program was discontinued as the foundry was no longer operational, plus the sculpture program had a brand new instructor. I was not discouraged and I enrolled in a new

course. I liked the new instructor and he agreed to allow me to continue working in metal so the obvious choice was to replace the foundry work with fabrication.

For the new projects I chose steel and I was excited to create a relationship with it. I always wanted to fabricate something out of steel but I lacked the knowledge and skill. Now I was given the opportunity to learn about steel's properties, how it is worked, and how it can exist in my art. As a material, steel is very affordable. It has the strength, hardness, and durability I required for my work. I quickly realized that I have control in every single aspect involved in working it. Steel allows me the ability to adjust weight by utilizing thicker or thinner gauges. Its intermolecular structure permits it to be flexible and malleable. Steel has no mind of its own so it can be forced into shape by bending and beating it into submission. But it wants to fight back. If you heat it up, it wants to burn you. If you cut metal, it can make you bleed. Working it can be like a battle but that's the fun of it. You are engaged in a conflict while working with it so you have to wear armor to protect yourself. Gloves are your gauntlets against fire and burns and a helmet protects your eyes and face. Fireproof canvas and leather protects your body from sparks and white hot metal . You attack with tools to suppress and destroy it. Blood, burns, and scars are very common and become badges of honor for a metal worker. The strife and struggle are part of the appeal. Steel also has the potential of having a high luster and can be polished to an almost mirror-like appearance. And finishing steel has almost endless possibilities as it can be sanded, etched, primed, painted, clear-coated, rusted, or blued, etc. But for me the two most important properties of steel are that it is very weldable and is easily cut.

I already knew how to cut, grind, and polish metal from cleaning up castings. So the next skill I needed to learn was how to weld. Welding was a requirement as the steel needed to be joined properly for appearance, strength, and safety. I bought an inexpensive stick welder but quickly abandoned it for a wire fed, flux core/MiG type. I taught myself about proper technique and correct machine settings. Becoming a skillful welder was crucial to my work as it has given me the ability to properly join, fill, and repair steel. It also helped with the challenge of controlling heat distortion, which could have adverse effects in the appearance of the work.

Because my work is being fabricated and not made from casting metal, I need my material to initially have very specific properties. Carbon steel is available in sheets of different thicknesses and this works well for my work. In commercial sheet form steel can be uninteresting. Being flat, rectangular, and blackish from scale it lacks any individuality of its own. In this form it all looks the same. Manufactured steel at this stage fits my purpose because I can easily cut and bend my shapes depending on the thickness. This is necessary to how I put my work together. I can cut individual patterns and shapes from steel sheet using either an angle grinder with a cut-off wheel or a plasma cutter. I try to cut the steel sheet into interesting abstract geometric shapes. I normally do this by using a few simple techniques. Starting with triangles, squares, and diamonds I adjust the angles and stretch certain lines to make more interesting shapes. I also will cut across an angle to add another line to achieve a more engaging shape. This helps when I want to make a QUAD shape into a PENTA shape. When I have 3 or 4 shapes that I really like I begin to put together the solid form by tack welding them aesthetically using other connecting shapes. Using cardboard templates is a technique I use to duplicate shapes after the piece has been started. The template shape is traced to the steel sheet and then cut to the exact size needed. If a

piece is needed for an inside angle, two templates are made and taped together at the bending point. After the template is cut in steel, the bend line is gouged out using a cut-off disc. This removes enough material to be able to bend the shape precisely but making sure the steel does not get cut all the way through. All of these individual pieces are then completely welded to each other so they amalgamate into one cohesive piece. Next, final cleanup is required. Welds on carbon steel can be easily cleaned up using an angle grinder and electric sander with a variety of abrasives as well as using an old fashioned metal file.

It was time to make. I had the tools, skills, and ideas so now I had to start the work. My initial abstract series in steel was based on sketches of twisting, polygon-type, other dimensional creatures that would to be attached to walls so they appeared as if they were floating through solid space (Fig 3). They were made from welding individual metal plates together to create solid looking but hollow chunks and then systematically welded to each other to form a twisting, segmented, organic-looking strand. These early pieces had a very "noisy" and chaotic look. They were refined and finished using paste epoxy and automotive paint. One piece, “Martian Pedagogy”, was painted using the water drop effect to give it a starfish-like texture and to enhance its alien appearance. I entered two of the pieces from this series in a student art show at G.S.U. where one of them, "Product of Tribulation" (Fig. 4), was awarded honorable mention. They were a good beginning to my process but I definitely wanted the work to improve and evolve. I felt those pieces needed to be stronger in presence and that they were somewhat lacking in their composition. Beginning at this point there would be an enormous emphasis on composition in all my future work.

I began sketching for my next series and wanted the pieces to be more thematic but continue to be about the necessity to achieve individuality. This new series would be comprised of 2 small sets of work, a main and its companion. The main set was called SEADE. It was a feigned word meant to imply the cosmos or other outer worlds. In this set the pieces were slightly larger and the overall appearance advanced with better composition and improved use of space. In the SEADE set I thought I definitely started to show more growth, control, and focus as an artist. The structures were more angular and piercing and I was successful in conveying a passion and provocation that the first series lacked. They were designed to depict the pains of leveling and to display the emotional response of overcoming one's self. Each one represented a type of weapon and included a spear, a battle axe, and a gun (Fig. 5,6,7). They were abstract weapons in a fight against absurdity and conformity. The SEADE set's companion was called NEMATOCYSTICKS. Another feigned word derived from combining a biology term with a parasitic bug. They were smaller in size comparatively to establish a parent-child appearance (Fig. 8,9). I imagined the NEMATOCYSTICKS would grow to become part of SEADE. SEADE and NEMATOCYSTICKS, being different but similar, were designed to have an artistic relationship, but I also imagined a symbiotic relationship much like the one the Remora fish and the Great White shark have in nature. None of the pieces in this set were wall mountable like the previous. They were all made to be shown on traditional gallery pedestals so the viewer had improved access and could move around, look under and through, and even touch. Both sets were fabricated from steel plate and they were finished using body filler, metal primer, and matte black automotive paint. I was very happy with how the work had turned out but then I decided I wanted to make bigger objects, plus I wanted to experiment with more colors and a new style.

At this time I was working at another corporate job where the work was routine and I was regularly bored so occasionally I would do some random sketching at my desk. One drawing I made was of a boxy looking animal with legs but no tail and an angular head. This sketch could have originated from my anger and awareness that I was now part of the corporate Herd. Or maybe I just wanted to subtly rebel and make a joke about being one of the livestock. Either way, I needed to detach myself from it by making more work and finding my individuality through creative self-expression. It would be from this one single sketch that my PHYLUM series would originate.

This new look, along with the new direction my work was moving towards, was significant because it proved to me that I was an artist without any distinct style. I would not be the type who could fill a space with sameness because I liked to move about in my art/sets with little concern for ties to the previous. Also my sets were only 3 to 5 pieces in total which was enough to get my meaning across and quickly move to something different and avoid boredom. But if any sameness did exist among the sets it was that it was crucial that the new work continued to be made from steel. I felt I had formed a successful artistic partnership with it. By this time I had been using steel as my material of choice for years and without any thought of switching to something else. I had worked it a lot and had gotten to know it very well. It would cut me, burn me, and choke me on chromium fumes but I would not get discouraged or irritated. It was strange but sometimes it felt as it the steel and I were working together as a team.

This was also when I began envisioning my bodies of work as “events” versus “series”. I was taking short journeys with a start and a finish or an arrival and a departure. They began with a

starting point in which there is the wonderful struggle to make something that is interesting and important plus the pressure to improve the output over any previous piece, but at the same time all this creative freedom can be paralyzing and cause anxiety. When these challenges are finally overcome and truth in satisfaction allows completion of the work the event ends with self-gratification and joy.

In the next set there would be 3 animals portrayed. The first animal in my new set would be porcine followed by canine, then bovine. I choose a pig first because I liked having the option of adding an actual skull into the piece and I already had one from E.I.U. Plus I had a long appreciation of Pink Floyd's meaningful use of pigs as props to delivery their opinions at their concerts. So the pig seemed like the perfect piece to begin with. I started by referring back to more of my recent drawings. They were very boxy, basic, and full of angles. For me, they were very reminiscent of a child's toy. To assist with this toy-like character I envisioned the pig, along with the dog and the cow, would be painted in either secondary or primary colors (Fig. 10, 11) . I choose bright red for the pig (Fig. 12). As these pieces were basically about absurdity they would be slightly less serious, so making them boxy looking and brightly colored added the necessary amount of cheeky humor I wanted. I knew viewers would see it as simply designed as it lacked intricacy and convolution, but for me the message was still a complex one. The message based on my recent experiences and was about control and conditioning, especially within the corporate environment. I was leveling again. I started asking questions like when did the cow stop being a cow and just become meat or milk? It was when it was on the farm. And when did a human loose individuality and become employee or worker? It was when it worked at a corporation. I was eating from the corporate trough and my feed was my salary. My pen was my

cubicle. I was being corralled and led by policy and procedure with my boss as my farmer. And my emanate slaughter might be my termination or retirement.

I proceeded to put together the pig dimensional data. For this set I would use a heavier 11 gauge steel. Being heavy was an important attribute I wanted them all to share plus it would almost make them as heavy as the actual animals they symbolized. I created a blueprint by using images of pigs to calculate and mimic the average proportions of the animal. I began initial fabrication on the box body by cutting plates for the sides and the frame strips. Most cutting was done using an angle grinder and abrasive cut-off discs. Presently I try to use the faster and cleaner plasma cutter whenever possible. The box body is important and should be done first because its sets the base for all the future fabricated parts. Once the box is built to size and the welds are cleaned up I begin the task of making the head frame. An actual skull is used to establish the shape and angles of this. After determining the correct width needed to properly house the skull, steel sheets are cut to size and welded to make planes that surround it. Next framing is added around each side and then another outer set of plates are cut and welded to complete the cranial container. I limit the number of side to no more than seven because I feel it's crucial to not compete with the minimal look of body box or the legs. Next, the 2 front legs and the 2 rear legs are designed. Even though preliminary sketches already exist, the design process for the legs really begins here. The proper legs could not be appropriately designed without having the box body and skull frame already made. The legs are meticulously designed with emphasis on perfect composition because the stance of the piece is extremely important to me. The process was intense with exactness. The box body is stacked on supports with the skull frame temporarily attached. Then 10 to 20 cardboard cutouts of slightly different legs are

positioned and taped to the elevated box body (Fig. 13,14). To assist in making the final design choice, each set of legs are photographed and then reviewed. Like the skull box I limit the number of frontal view planes each leg has to 4 or less to not compete with other areas of the piece and to be consistent with my overall minimalistic approach. This may seem like a lot of consideration for just 4 legs, but for me it's how the leg's lines and angles create the stance are one of the most important features of the piece. Once the best pattern is finally chosen and the correct length is determined the four legs are fabricated and welded to the body. Once again paying close attention to vertical front and side positioning so they are properly placed and line up with each other. The final step in the fabrication process is attaching the skull frame to the front side of the box body. Again, just like the legs, determining the best position is vital to perfect composition. First, it has to be right- left centered before I can eyeball the up-down height and the final positioning. Lastly, distance from the body and head angle are then determined. I weld the skull frame to the box body by using a double neck system. A smaller, inner neck box is primarily used for attachment and positioning. Then a larger, outer neck box is welded around the inner neck box to achieve extra strength to hold the heavy skull frame and to achieve final neck dimension/composition (Fig. 15). Final preparation is completed by fixing any minor imperfections and smoothing out the welds. Then the entire piece is sanded down and cleaned to get it ready for filler, primer and paint.

In my final and mosr recent series, Nemotocysticks II, I went in another direction again. All pieces from the original set that were made as companions for the Seade series were destroyed in a studio fire. I really like all of the pieces from that set and really wanted to "remake" them. In every other set the final product looked very close to the original sketch, but not in the first

nematocystick set. They were made "on the fly" using no preliminary sketches or drawings to reference or copy. I wanted to recreate these using the same technique but with some differences, so I did something slightly similar but with some twists. I had photographs of most of the old pieces. I studied the photos of each piece from different views and picked some of my favorite shapes from each piece. Using 11-13 gauge sheet steel I cut out the shapes I picked from each piece but in a larger scale and began placing them close to where the originals were. I then connected them using completely different shapes often trying to change direction or flow of the original piece it represented. I thought of using this similarity to the original with major differences to be what the destroyed pieces would have grown into or evolved if it that was possible. I let my imagination run wild and at completion each piece had grown in size and had many more sides and shapes than the originals. These new Nematocysticks were much more detailed which made them more intricate to build. Each piece had many inside angles that would have been challenging to weld and cleanup so I used the template method to determine those connections. And for connections with inside angles I avoided cutting these pieces by making templates, cutting the shape in steel, and gouging or slicing the back of the piece, being very careful not to cut through. This was done so I did not have to weld any inside angles. Another change was that I opted out of painting the new pieces in the Nematocystick II set. To keep a more natural metal look and to differentiate them from the other painted sets I used bluing solution to finish. I applied it to each piece in different concentrations and number of applications to experiment with final results. All pieces had slightly different tones and variations in sheen which I liked because they all had slightly unique patinas. Unique and contrasted but connected to all previous sets by intention (Fig. 16).

My work has always been made with intention. Individuality at all cost, for the most part. Some pieces were made to remind me of the dangers of commercialism and brainwashing through advertising, and how the mass culture making machine by psychological manipulation is ridiculous and a reality. Some were made to poke fun at the absurdity of the corporation and maybe at man directly. And some were just made to be made, to have the experience with steel. All were authentic in representation. Meaning that great care was always taken with composition and design to my own standard. All would help me to exist as an individual and to feel I had something unique to offer. And maybe most important was that all were made from steel.

Fig 1.

Fig 2.

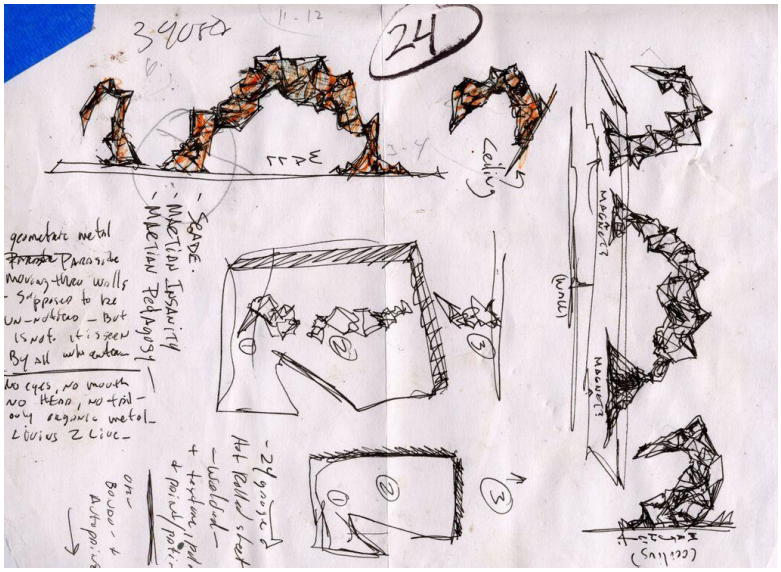
24
SCADE
MARTIAN INDUSTRY
MARTIAN PEDAGOGY
geometric metal
Parasite
moving-three walls
supposed to be
UN-habited - but
is not. it is seen
By all who enter
no eyes, no mouth
NO head, no trail -
only organic metal
Living I Live
Ledivy
Wall
Magnet
Magnet
Wall
24 project
Art Ballad sheet
+ textures/pa
& paint/pat
- welded -
on
Border - 4
Autopsi

Fig 3.

Fig 4.

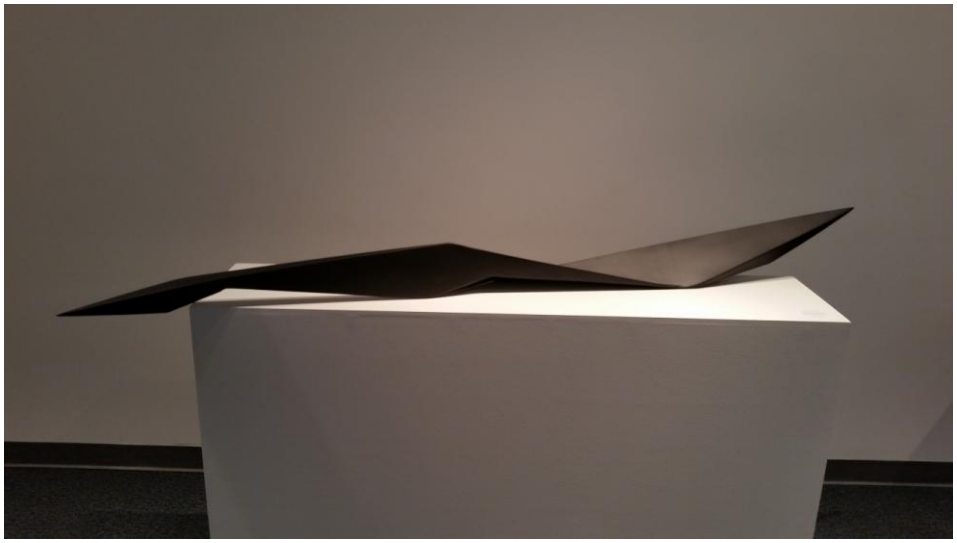

Fig 5.

Fig 6.

Fig 7.

Fig 8.

Fig 9.

Fig 10.

Fig 11.

Fig 12.

Fig 13.

Fig 14.

Fig 15.

Fig 16.